A Brief Tour of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

The Gardner Museum is the achievement of Isabella Stewart Gardner who formed the collection, designed the building and, ultimately, endowed it.

Born in New York, Isabella Stewart came to Boston in 1860 as the bride of John L. Gardner. She became a prominent member of society but devoted most of her talent, energy and wealth to the cultivation of music and art. In the 1870's she began to purchase rare books and manuscripts but her interest soon extended to other fields. In addition to acquiring sculpture, textiles, furniture, ceramics and metalwork, she and her husband formed one of the first great collections of old master paintings in America. At the turn of the century, Mrs. Gardner, by then a widow, built Fenway Court and incorporated it as a museum to house her collection. She herself occupied an apartment in the building until her death in 1924.

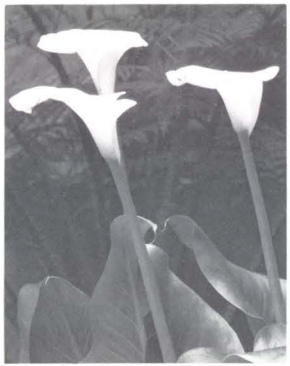
The seal which Mrs. Gardner designed for her museum was characteristic; a shield bearing a phoenix, symbol of immortality, and the frank motto, *C'est mon plaisir* (it is my pleasure). Fenway Court was designed in the style of a Venetian Renaissance palace. Each gallery has a character of its own: the walls of some are hung with rich damask while others have rough wood panelling and heavy beamed ceilings. The collection itself is perhaps most interesting because it is a personal one. Composed exclusively of the acquisitions of Isabella Stewart Gardner, it is permanently arranged in the manner which she chose. Made up of approximately two thousand objects, it represents many cultures and spans more than thirty centuries.

The Spanish Cloister is located opposite the public entrance. The large painting of *El Jaleo* (1882) is the work of Mrs. Gardner's friend John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) and was his first big Salon success. The title refers to the Spanish dance being performed. Its setting with the Moorish arch and lighting from below were designed by Mrs. Gardner to enhance the impression of a stage on which the artist had seen flamenco dancers on an earlier trip to Granada.

The tiles on the Cloister wall are from a XVII-century Mexican church and were purchased for her by another American painter, her good friend Dodge Macknight (1860-1950).

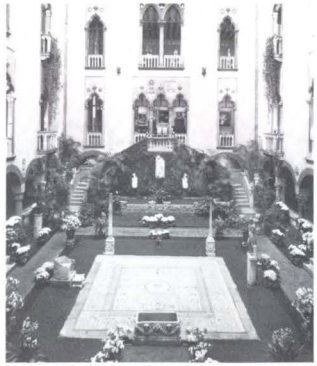
On either side of the entrance doorway are two limestone reliefs, the *Entry into Jerusalem* and *Two Kings* or *Elders of the Apocalypse.* These mid-XII-century figures are from the façade of Notre-Dame-de-la-Couldre at Parthenay, in Poitou.

The Chinese Loggia runs parallel to the *Spanish Cloister* and leads to the outside gardens, which are open to the public in warm weather. The Chinese Buddhist votive stele is inscribed with the date 543 and the names of its more than seventy donors. It is a particularly beautiful example of its type and is advanced in style for the period (Eastern Wei dynasty). The central figure of Buddha forms with his right hand the gesture of fearlessness and with his left that of charity. This stele was one of several Oriental objects that Bernard Berenson, best known for his connoisseurship of Italian Renaissance paintings, recommended to her late in her collecting career.

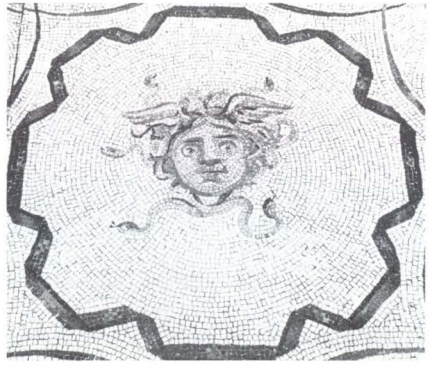


Beyond the *Loggia* is the **Museum Shop** where further information is available, as well as recorded tours, Museum publications, postcards and other reproductions of works in the collection.

The Museum's greenhouses located on the premises allow the gardeners to carry on the tradition of floral displays that Mrs. Gardner initiated. Freesia, jasmine, azaleas and nasturtiums appear in the spring, lilies and cineraria at Easter, chrysanthemums in the fall, poinsettias and cyclamen at Christmas.



The sculpture-filled **Court** is at the center of the building (patterned on a XV-century Venetian palace), and all of the upper galleries open onto it. Mrs. Gardner built the Museum that she and her husband John Lowell Gardner had planned together prior to his death in 1898. Ground was broken the following year and the architect chosen for the project was Willard T. Sears. The Museum was officially opened to the public in January of 1903. Mrs. Gardner's fascination with Venice accounts for the large number of objects from that city: balconies, window frames and balustrades on the court walls, as well as paintings and sculpture throughout the galleries.



In the center of the *Court* is a mosaic floor from a Roman villa of the II century A.D. The head of Medusa is surrounded by delicate scrolling vines and birds representing the Four Seasons.

There are two small galleries on either side of the front entrance to the Museum: the **Yellow Room** and the **Blue Room.** In these galleries Mrs. Gardner placed most of the XIX and XX century works that she acquired. One of the most notable paintings is *The Terrace, St. Tropez* (1904) by Henri Matisse (1869-1954). The first painting by the artist to enter an American museum, it depicts his wife, dressed in a kimono, at the home of fellow painter Paul Signac.

Also included in these two rooms are portraits by Manet and Degas, landscapes by Mrs. Gardner's good friend James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), and works by the so-called American Impressionists, many of them local painters whose work she collected after the turn of the century. The last portrait of her, done by Sargent in 1922 just two years before her death, hangs in the *Yellow Room.* The watercolor, a rather ghostly portrayal of her swathed in white fabric, is clearly the work of a sympathetic and caring friend.

The **Cloisters** surrounding the Court contain sculpture from many different periods and countries but, like Mrs. Gardner's paintings collection, the bulk of it is Italian. The large marble sarcophagus in the West Cloister is III-century Roman and is decorated with the dancing figures of followers of Dionysus, the god of wine. The original lid may have had one or two figures of the deceased reclining on it, as if on an elaborate couch.

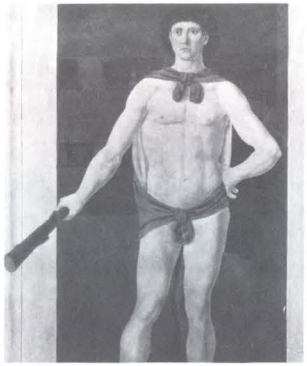
At the south end of the West Cloister is the Istrian stone *Madonna della Ruota della Carità* (1522) created by the Venetian sculptor Giovanni Maria Mosca. The relief was made for the façade of a building belonging to the Scuola della Carità in Venice.

At the top of the stairs is the **Room of Early Italian Paintings.** The paintings cover a period from about 1320 to 1520, and the earliest is the five-part altarpiece by the Sienese painter Simone Martini (1283/5-1344). Filled with the symbolism and color that had developed out of Byzantine art, the Virgin and saints have a delicacy and intensity that are characteristic of Simone's work. He and Giotto are understandably thought of as the artistic giants of the XIV century. Mrs. Gardner was very much ahead of her time in her decision to collect such early gold ground paintings. This is the only large and complete polyptych by the painter outside of Italy.

Next to the window across the room is a small panel painting of *The Death and Assumption of the Virgin.* Painted by the monk Fra Angelico (*ca.* 1430), it is an example of Italian Renaissance ideals as they developed in Florence. The faces now have a more individual character and the suggestion of space is more convincing and complex, although still arranged overall into three distinct bands. According to tradition the saints are shown around the Virgin's bier with Christ in the middle holding a child, symbol of the departed soul.

Under the Simone Martini is a long wooden panel, once the front of a marriage chest (*ca.* 1448). On this panel and its

companion are illustrated *The Triumphs* of the poet Petrarch (1304-1374) by a follower of Fra Angelico, Francesco Pesellino (1422-1457). Three are here: Love with his bow and arrows on the first carriage, Chastity with Love bound at her feet on the second, and Death on the third. Persons surrounding the allegorical figures are dressed in contemporary fashion. The second panel, on the other side of the door, shows Fame (in a circle of glory) with the great rulers on her right, the heroes of science and literature on her left. Time enters drawn by swift stags. Eternity is a scene apart, where from the heavens God sends down blessings to the new earth.



Above the right-hand panel by Pesellino is the mythological figure of *Hercules* in his lion skin by Piero della Francesca (d. 1492). Done in fresco (painting on wet plaster) and originally full-length, the fragment formed part of the decoration of the artist's own house, and was meant to be seen high on a wall or over a doorway. It exemplifies the interest in the human form and in classical mythology that flourished during the Renaissance.

To the right is a small tempera painting by Masaccio (1401-1428/9) of *A Young Man in a Scarlet Turban.* One of the first of modern portraits, it expresses the growing hold of secular life on the arts.

In the far corner of the **Raphael Room** there is a version of a portrait (Pitti Palace, Florence) by the great High Renaissance painter, Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520). The sitter is *Count Tommaso Inghirami* (1470-1516), who was made Poet Laureate and Count Palatine by Emperor Maximilian; Vatican Librarian by Pope Julius II; and Secretary to the Lateran Council and to the College of Cardinals by Leo X. He was a gifted preacher and scholar.

On the table below is a small oil *Pietà,* done when Raphael was in his early twenties. This panel originally formed part of the predella of the so-called Colonna altarpiece commissioned by the nuns of Sant'Antonio at Perugia.

To the right is a panel by Carlo Crivelli (recorded 1457-95) of *St. George and the Dragon.* Painted in the artist's characteristically elegant and rather mannered style, this gold ground painting lovingly describes the decorative ornament of the saint's armor and the ornate trappings of his horse. The *St. George* originally was the right-hand panel of a great altarpiece painted in 1470 for the high altar of the parish church at Porto S. Giorgio, a small town on the Adriatic coast.

Another painting on this same wall is *The Tragedy of Lucretia* by Sandro Botticelli (1444/5-1510), which hangs above a XV-century gilded wedding chest. A late work painted after 1500, it tells in three scenes the legend of the events that led to the founding of the Roman republic around 510 B.C. The Roman Lucretia is threatened by Sextus, son of the Tarquin king, on the left; dishonored, she falls self-slain into the arms of her husband on the right; in the center she lies on her bier as her husband's friend incites the Romans to throw off the Tarquin rule. The architecture, like a stage set used for a tragedy, is decorated with scenes from ancient history and the Bible. The statue of David on the column, suggesting, as do many of the scenes, the overthrow of tyranny, may have been used to recall the expulsion of the Medici government from Florence a few years earlier. The view in the background is recognizable as a Florentine landscape. This painting, purchased in 1894, was the first of the many important old master paintings recommended by Bernard Berenson.

Across the room on the west wall is a large *Annunciation* (*ca.* 1480) by the Master of the Gardner Annunciation, recently identified as the Umbrian artist, Piermatteo d'Amelia (active *ca.* 1450-1500). In this depiction, the traditional theme takes place in a XV-century Florentine palazzo carefully rendered in the recently developed technique of linear perspective.

In the **Short Gallery** is the popular portrait of Mrs. Gardner (1894) by the Swedish artist, Anders Zorn (1860-1920). He captured her rushing in from a balcony during a fireworks display over the Grand Canal in Venice. Other portraits in this gallery include those of her husband by Antonio Mancini (1852-1930), of her grandmother by Thomas Scully (1783-1872) and of her great grandmother by an unknown artist.

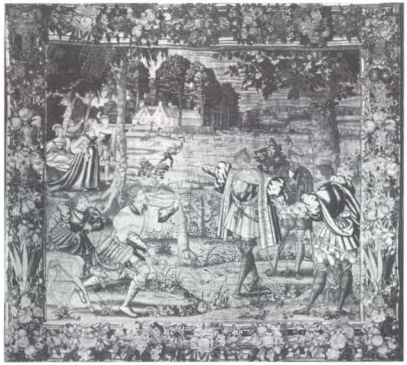
The cases on the east wall contain most of the prints and drawings in the collection. Designed by Mrs. Gardner, the doors open to panels with drawings that include Michelangelo's *Pietà* for Vittoria Colonna, *A Papal Procession* attributed to Raphael, five sketches by Matisse and several works by Degas. There are also numerous prints by Whistler and Zorn.

Much of the furniture and decorative woodwork in the **Little Salon** is done in a Venetian version of the French Louis XV style (XVIII century). The four tapestries with scenes of courtly pleasures are called the *Château and Garden* series. They date from the late XVI and early XVII centuries. The two opposite the door were made in Paris, while the other two are from Brussels.

To the left of the fireplace hangs *The Car of Vênus* by François Boucher (1703-1770). The delicate Rococo style is typical of this artist whose patroness was the Marquise de Pompadour and whose paintings were popular decorations in the palaces of the French nobility.

In the **Tapestry Room** are three Spanish paintings of which the finest is *S. Engracia* (*ca.* 1477) by Bermejo (d. after 1495). It is the central panel from a large altarpiece dedicated to this martyr who was killed in the IV century in Spain. She holds her attributes: in her right hand, the palm of the Virgin Martyr and in her left, her own symbol, the nail.

The ten tapestries are from Brussels, *ca.* 1550. Those with Latin inscriptions represent scenes from the life of Abraham, the others, episodes from the life of Cyrus the Great. The former have imaginary costumes supposed to represent those of biblical times, the latter, costumes of the period



of the Emperor Charles V. The landscape is that of the Low Countries, which were then a part of the Hapsburg empire. The borders of fruits and birds are characteristic of XVI century work.

Mrs. Gardner's love of music and encouragement of young talent are carried on through the Museum's regular presentation of concerts in this room several times a week. Concert schedules and programs are available at the Museum Shop.

On the center wall of the **Dutch Room** (opposite the Court) is a portrait by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). As accomplished in diplomacy as he was in painting, the artist was court painter and adviser to the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella (see her portrait by Pourbus also in this room). The sitter is *Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel* (1585-1646), one of the earliest English collectors of antiquities and a great patron of the arts. He is portrayed wearing the badge of a Knight of the Garter and carries the gold baton of the Earl Marshal.

The Concert by Vermeer (1632-1675), on the stand by the window, is one of fewer than 40 works that survive by the artist. His use of light to define form and space is unequalled, as can be seen by a comparison with the painting by Ter Borch in the same room. Depicted on the wall behind the singer in *The Concert* is a picture by van Baburen, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston that probably hung at one time in the artist's own home.

There are three paintings by Rembrandt (1606-1669) as well as a landscape that until recently was attributed to him, but is now believed to be by one of his students, Govaert Flinck (1615-1660). The *Self-Portrait,* done when the artist was only 23, hangs on the Court wall and across from it are *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee,* Rembrandt's only known marine painting, and from the same year the double portrait of

an unidentified *Lady and Gentleman in Black.* X-rays of this painting revealed that there originally was a child between the two adults, that the mother turned to look at the child and that something other than the chair was planned for the area in the left foreground. The Flinck *Obelisk* (1638) is a rare example of a landscape known to have been done by the artist. Infra-red photography of this dramatic and rather ominous work recently disclosed the first letters of the artist's signature, which were painted out and replaced by a single *R* at some time in the XIX century.

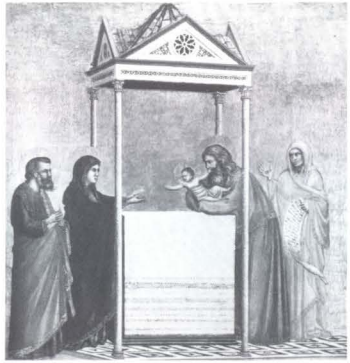
copy of it is now in the Prado in Madrid. The small sketch on the table below is after Rubens' version of the *Europa* by his student, Van Dyck.

On the same wall is one of two surviving portrait busts by Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571). The sitter is Bindo Altoviti, a Florentine banker and patron of the arts, and the bronze bust is mentioned in Cellini's autobiography, in which he cites a letter from Michelangelo praising it. A portrait of *Philip IV of Spain* (1605-1665) by Velázquez (1599-1660) is to the left.

In the **Long Gallery** is another painting by Botticelli, *The Madonna of the Eucharist* (*ca.* 1475), in which the angel holds symbolic grapes and grain. The painting is unusually sculptural for Botticelli, and is an interesting contrast to his much later *Lucretia* panel in the *Raphael Room.* In the area of the angel's and Madonna's heads one can see the *pentimenti,* or changes, that the artist made in positioning them. They have become more visible as the paint has turned more translucent with time.

Farther down this same wall is *The Young Lady of Fashion* that was bought by Mrs. Gardner as the work of Uccello (1397-1475) but is now attributed to the Master of the Castello Nativity. This work is characteristic of Italian portraits of the XV century and should be compared to the two other profile portraits on the second floor.

This gallery also contains classical and Renaissance sculpture, medieval ivories and enamels, religious furnishings, and cases that contain many of Mrs. Gardner's extensive collection of rare books and bindings. The stained glass window (*ca.* 1205) in the **Chapel** is from Soissons Cathedral and although restored in places, is considered to be the finest example from early XIII-century France in this country.



A small panel by Giotto (1267-1336/7), beside the window in the **Gothic Room,** depicts *The Presentation of the Infant Jesus in the Temple.* The newborn Child has been brought to the temple by his parents, as was the custom, to be received by the priest Simeon and the prophetess Anna. God's promise to Simeon that he would see the coming of the Savior before his death is implied in the scene. Giotto's gift for narrative expressed through solid figures and simple gestures — well-demonstrated here — changed the course of European painting and prepared the way for the painters of the next century.

The painting that dominates the room, however, is John Singer Sargent's portrait of *Isabella Stewart Gardner* (1888). The artist portrayed her with her famous pearls wrapped around her waist and placed her in front of a damask whose pattern suggests a halo. Her strictly frontal stance reinforces the iconic severity, but her black dress nonetheless caused a stir when the painting was briefly exhibited. On its return to the *Gothic Room,* the gallery remained closed to the public until her death. The room did have other uses, however, serving for instance as a studio for Sargent during the winter of 1902-03.

Museum Hours

Open Tuesday through Sunday
11 A.M. – 5 P.M.
Closed Mondays.
Open some holidays.

Admission

$6.00 for adults, $3.00 for senior citizens and students with I.D.
Members and children under 12 admitted free at all times.

Concerts

September through May
Concert information: 617 734-1359

Gardner Café

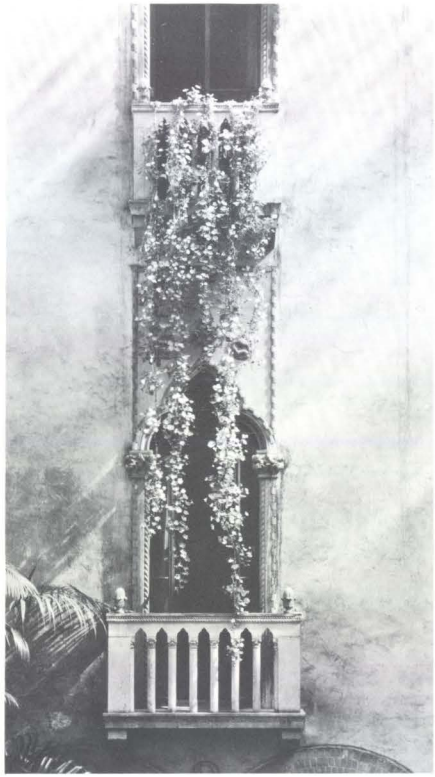
Tuesday through Friday
11:30 A.M. – 3 P.M.
Weekends from 11:30 A.M. – 4 P.M.

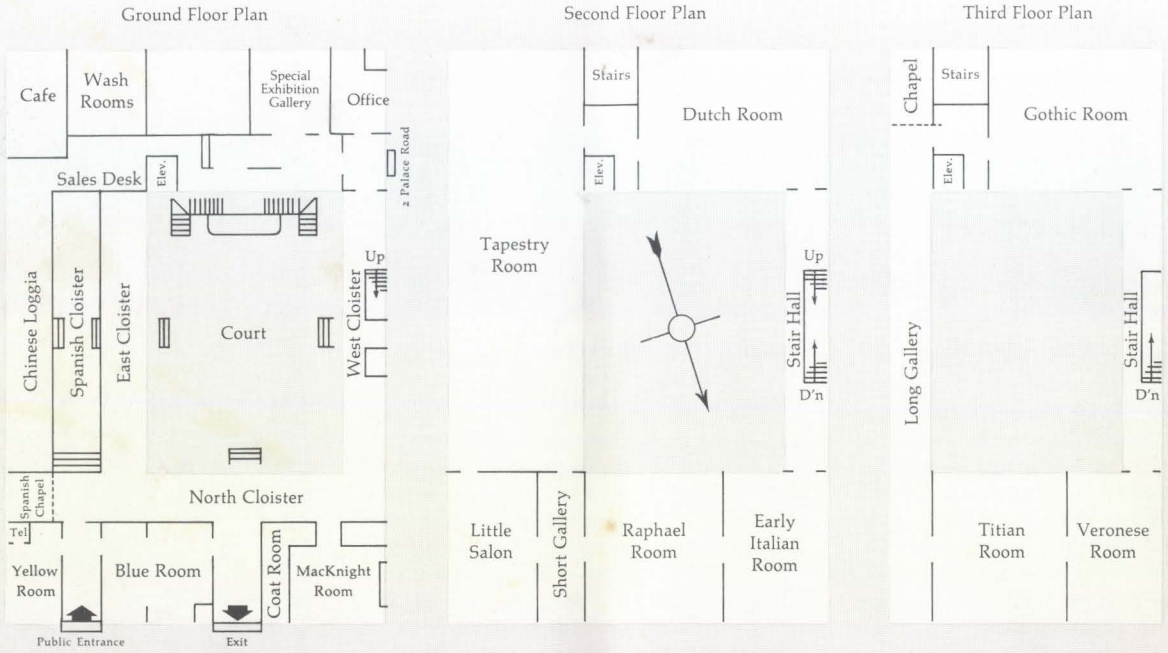
Mailing Address

2 Palace Road
Boston, MA 02115

Telephone

617 566-1401





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